

Young Turk to tackle a classic thriller

THEATRE: Equus gets an outing in Glen Eden, reports Dionne Christian

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HORSEPLAY: The Equus cast (back row, left to right) Elaine Vaughan, Sarah Gallagher, Patrick Wilson and Annie Whittle. Front row, from left, Phil Adams, director Jesse Peach, and Ashley Hawkes.

AT just 23, West Aucklander Jesse Peach is tackling Equus — a play considered to be one of the great English post-war dramas, a classic psychological thriller which explores the darker side of human nature.

The one-time Shortland Street actor turned theatre director does not hesitate to stage challenging modern classics — perhaps because of his youthfulness.

Last year, Peach cast well-known actress Annie Whittle in *The Glass Menagerie*; the year before that he made his directorial debut with *Billy Liar*.

He returns this year, taking a break from his day job as a TV3 news reporter, to direct Equus.

The Auckland Theatre Company staged Equus just two years ago, but Peach believes his production will attract a different audience because of the venue, Glen Eden's Playhouse Theatre. "The theatre comes to the audience this way rather than the audience having to go to it."

Peter Shaffer was inspired to write Equus after hearing about a crime in which a teenage boy injured horses, creating a fictional account of why the boy may have committed such a gruesome crime.

In Shaffer's story, Alan Strang is a troubled stable-boy sent to an equally — but less obviously — unsettled and disillusioned psychiatrist, Martin Dysart, after blinding six horses. Dysart attempts to treat Strang but is increasingly confronted with his own discordant feelings.

After premiering in 1973 in London, Equus ran on Broadway for more than 1000 performances and won four drama awards including a 1974 Tony Award.

Nudity and animal cruelty are two aspects of the play which usually garner the most attention, repelling or fascinating audiences. Peach sees these as incidental to a plot full of religious imagery and forceful questions about the nature of life in a godless society.

“Yes, it’s a big play with massive themes but it’s exciting and it has themes which relate to people on a very basic and human level,” he says.

Equus has a cast of 13— more than Peach has directed before, with specific staging demands in recreating the horses that run through Strang’s bizarre imaginings.

Peach approached the actors he wanted for each role, saying if he had held auditions he doubted he would have achieved the calibre of people he wanted.

“I am a young and inexperienced director, the play is on in West Auckland and we are paying next to nothing. It’s not much of a selling point.”

Ashley Hawkes, who featured in *The Glass Menagerie* and *Billy Liar*, plays Alan Strang; Phil Adams is Martin Dysart; while Patrick Wilson and Annie Whittle are Strang’s dysfunctional parents.

Wilson, starring in TV One’s *Rude Awakenings*, says he heard such positive industry feedback about Peach’s work that he was keen to accept the role; Whittle says she didn’t hesitate.

“I didn’t even know what the play was but I enjoyed working with Jesse so much last year that I wanted to do it again.”

Hawkes, too, describes the opportunity to appear in a work like *Equus* as too good to shy away from. He is not worried about the nudity nor the scene in which Strang’s crime is portrayed.

“They’re really a small part but a very necessary part of a much larger and complex story.”

It doesn’t hurt, either, that *Equus* is once again enjoying a high profile thanks to the London production, starring Daniel Radcliffe, of *Harry Potter* fame. A magical coincidence, says Peach.